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ABSTRACT

In this paper, presented at the sixteenth annual International Reading Association convention, the author argues that the destitution of the Appalachian region of West Virginia and Kentucky can be partially blamed on inadequate educational funding. As a result of inadequate taxing of commercial and industrial properties, adequate schools have not been provided, and, thus, both children and adults have been denied the right to read. The author asserts that educational reform cannot take place without even, healthy economic growth as well as reforms in state and local government. He also argues that public education in Appalachia must express the local mountain culture, not only the dominant middle class culture outside teachers bring with them to the area; that teachers in this area should be trained to function across these two contrasting cultures; and that publicizing the right to read is not the same thing as providing the right to read. (Author/DI)

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# Appalachia: The Right to Read

Early in the 1960's the American people rediscovered the Southern Appalachians. John Kennedy, with the primaries his one hope for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, led the way into West Virginia's coal-rich mountains to seek favor with 8,850,000 descendents of Scotch-Irish pioneers who settled the State. John F. Kennedy, like many of his countrymen, had never known the hunger and the misery of the mining fields, and with television close at his heels, he and the country were shocked and dismayed to see the spoil banks of a century of private glut and public poverty. Americans encountered the parodox of West Virginia, a state that in some years produces more coal than all of Germany, yet includes within its boundaries no fewer than twenty counties where welfare recipients make up at least fifteen per cent of the population (11). In addition to voters, Kennedy found shy, ragged and undernourished hill children whose language, customs, and spirit echoed the Ulstermen who settled these steep and convoluted

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mountains two hundred years ago. Later television documentaries on hunger in America added the squalor and poverty of the Cumberland Plateau to this geography of misery.

A decade after John F. Kennedy's primary victory in West Virginia, there is still no end in sight to the destitution and devastation of the Southern Appalachians. The once self-sufficient and fiercely independent Appalachian Highlander has been all but reduced to a ward of the Federal government -- broken in spirit, possessing little and expecting less, he has been cursed by coal and plundered by a morally corroded industrial society. Over the past decade, his legacy has been the apathy of a public grown indifferent to suffering. No small share of responsibility for the appalling state in which these mountaineers find themselves can be laid at the feet of education. For it has been through ignorance as much as avarice that this spectacle has been produced. So long as the mountains remain a haven for the illiterate and uneducated, they will also remain a safe refuge for those who would extract the earth's riches virtually untaxed.

Literacy, Industry, and Government

The relationship between good schools and an adequate tax base is so obvious that it hardly bears repeating, but the lesson appears to have been lost on those who levy taxes throughout much of the Southern Highlands. Caudill describes the fantastic attitude held by all too many tax officials whose decisions have condemned hundreds of school systems to penury:

> Incredible as it may seem, it was taken for granted by practically the entire population that the industry

> would die if called upon to finance decent schools for the children who swarmed in the streets of its camps. The chairman of a County Board of Tax Supervisors summed up this nonsense a few years ago by confiding that 'a coal company owns so many houses it would go broke if it had to pay a tax on each one at the same rate the ordinary citizen would pay on a similar house. They own so much property that it just don't stand to reason they could pay taxes on it at the same rate you or I pay on our houses and businesses!' This airy absurdity ignored the fact that these same companies owned nearly all of his county's income-producing wealth and that each of the houses of which he was so solicitous was paying a hefty monthly rental to its owner (3).

Even the most superficial perusal of The Statistical Abstract of the United States prepared by the Bureau of the Census reveals that taxes on mining properties constitute only a fraction of revenues collected by state and local governments. In Kentucky, for example, commercial and industrial property taxes comprise only 3.6 per cent of the total tax levied against real property in the state (2). Until adequate schools become a reality in Appalachia, there is little reason to hope that the right to read for countless children and adults will amount to more than empty rhetoric. While not readily apparent, tax reform is an integral part of the right to read.

The mineral wealth of the Appalachians is staggering. One seam of coal five feet thick produces over 5000 tons of coal an acre worth $25,000 (10). In 1968 alone, 556,706,000 tons of coal were mined in the United States. Of this amount, 433,154,000 tons were produced in Appalachia valued at over 2.5 billion dollars (2). Profits from coal were enormous. The Virginia Coal and Iron Company, a Philadelphia corporation which owns mineral rights in Kentucky and Virginia, is alleged to have earned a net profit of 61 per cent and to have paid

a dividend of 45 cents on the dollar in 1964 (4). These figures indicate how inseparable the right to read and good government are, and how the right to read can become a reality for hundreds of thousands of children in Appalachia if a legitimate part of our vast private wealth can be invested in public education. Caudill eloquently summarized this relationship as follows:

> Every ton of coal and limestone, each barrel of oil, and comparable measure of gas should leave in taxes the price of at least one new brick for a Kentucky schoolhouse. This goal may be distant but the time to begin is now. East Kentucky is sick, sick with multitudes of paupers atop mountains of wealth, and sick with an ineffective political system maintained by an uncomprehending electorate. And this situation will continue until Kentuckians decide to control their own affairs, until they tax the privilege of severing the wealth from the land and invest the money in schools, health centers, libraries, and public facilities, until a knowledgeable electorate can be created capable of curbing the corporations which operate in their midst (4).

For too long now educators have ignored real issues like this preferring instead to suggest popgun classroom solutions which, indeed, only serve to obscure education's critical needs and the nature of the decisions which must be made if illiteracy is to be conquered. As the Coleman report makes clear, a better life and literacy go hand in hand. The right-to-read program has stumbled through two directors, and Ruth Holloway, who has headed California's Bureau of Compensatory Education, has become its newest director. With one million dollars earmarked by the U. S. Office of Education for a "major frontal attack" on reading, she has a long way to go for that is just about enough money to build a single elementary school in the Highlands. What is needed from Washington is a clear set of priorities and intelligent policies with some hope of stimulating even, healthy economic growth as well as

reforms in the basic structure of state and local government.

Literacy in Appalachia

Estimates of the number of illiterates to be found in the states which go to make up Appalachia vary considerably. The latest issue of the National Education Association's research bulletin, Rankings of the States, shows that of the population fourteen years of age and older in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, three to three and one-half per cent can neither read nor write (5). Because these figures reflect the entire population of each state, it can be expected that percentages will be much higher for rural mountain hollows and small county seats. Some estimates run as high as one-fourth of the adult population (4). Others reflect a much brighter picture. In a survey of 29,608 fourth graders, Ramsey reported that children in Kentucky were reading on a par with national norms on the California Achievement Test. By eighth grade, however, students in Kentucky's schools had fallen over half a year behind national norms for reading achievement (6). In two other studies of first-grade children attending isolated mountain schools in Tennessee and West Virginia, at the end of grade one these children were reading slightly but not significantly below national norms on the Stanford Achievement Test (7). Interestingly though, means for given schools varied widely, yet the communities from which the schools were drawn randomly were similar in nearly every respect (7). Ramsey also reported a wider-than-expected range of reading achievement among Kentucky children, much wider than the national norm group (6).

The picture that emerges from these estimates is mixed. It is probably safe to conclude that programs launched by the Federal government have begun to take effect on younger children: there appear to be fewer obvious signs of malnutrition, median family income has increased slightly, schools are getting materials and libraries where they have never had them before (2). The number of high school graduates has increased steadily over the past decade everywhere in the Highlands except West Virginia where the number has dropped three per cent (5). Schools are getting better than they were a decade ago, but relative to the rest of the country, it is difficult to cheer these results. Children appear to be getting a somewhat better start in reading most likely dependent on the quality of the schools in their community. These gains, however, appear to give way in the face of increased demands on reading ability in junior and senior high school. The distribution of quality education remains spotty. In and near the county seats roads and consolidated schools paid for by sales taxes mandated in the early 1960's have been of obvious benefit, but not far away, the pavement turns to muddy ruts, ramshackle schoolhouses dot the creek bottoms which are little more than open sewers, and children still cannot go to school because their parents cannot provide them with shoes and clothing.

## What Can Be Done?

Confronted by massive problems, the temptation is often strong to suggest instant remedies or to define them to fit available solutions. Reacting to his encounter with Appalachia, Peter Schrag observed:

> Perhaps the chief consequence of the recent programs in Appalachia is the realization that poverty and exploitation, isolation and ignorance, are not susceptible to left-handed solutions, that they are linked to the general affluence, and that they raise moral questions which strike at the very heart of America'a willingness to bring a decent life to all its citizens (9).

Instead of recommending another "left-handed solution" it seems far more appropriate to consider how rather than what should be done. Nearly every effort to aid and develop Appalachia has been blunted by the mountaineer's uncanny ability to resist the imposition of cultural assumptions that are not his own. This is to his everlasting credit, for, aside from the reprehensible arrogance of one culture running roughshod over another, there are aspects of life in the mountains which middle-class America might well ponder in its rootless driven rush toward progress and success.

To understand how illiteracy can be reduced, not only the interplay between cultures must be understood, but the validity of the highlander's life must be accepted as well. A significant trait of the mountain man is his fierce independence inherited from the frontier. Each family makes its own way and each child learns to depend upon himself and does not readily ask for help. When help is given, it is accepted matter-of-factly with the burden of responsibility accruing to those who offer. Teaching the mountain child to read, far more than most other children, must grow out of his own personal needs and interests, must bend to his individuality, and must be taken to him rather than made available for him while keeping in mind that the dedication this calls for will likely to be its own reward.

Margaret Anderson tells, though, how substantial both the response and reward can be when teaching is attuned to these hard demands. She writes about an old bandmaster who for more than thirty years has visited half a dozen or more schools a week over hazardous and gutted mountain roads, through flooded hollows and over frozen, wind-swept spurs to carry a set of battered instruments to children who would otherwise never have the opportunity to play. "From his classes have come some of the great musicians and teachers of the area"(1).

To the consternation and frustration of legions of teachers throughout the Appalachian Highlands, routine and order are the antithesis of the mountain child's life style. Routine is tolerated only for brief episodes to be abandoned at the first hint of action. Fishing and the lure of a mountain stream become an irresistable temptation in Spring. There is little to choose between when the routines of the school room are pitted against the rigors of the playing field. Athletics for many Pennsylvania mining communities afford not only an exciting diversion, but, indeed, constitute a serious drain on resources and divert attention from serious shortcomings in the schools. The following example may provide a glimmer of insight for those who despair of ever finding a way to cope with this characteristic:

> I gained an interesting insight into this aspect of mountain life during the painting of a country church. Many men in the community were unemployed, and we felt that if those who were working bought the paint, the others could put it on. After we bought the paint we tried to line up volunteers. Not one man would commit himself: 'I can't promise you nothin'. Somethin' might come up.' One of the men in the congregation, instinctively under-

> standing this psychology, suggested that we have the paint, brushes, and ladders ready in front of the church one morning; as the men went by on their way to the post office and general store, he said, we could ask them whether they could paint for a couple hours that very day. Their response was remarkable. Many of the men painted all day every day until the job was finished -- men who beforehand would not agree to being 'signed up' for a single day (10).

Teaching and class routine would seem to fit neatly into the same sort of conflict situation. In the sense that the "open school" and British integrated-day primary programs are action rather than routine oriented, they may have much to commend them to the mountain setting. To the degree that the reading curriculum is alive with opportunities for doing, to that extent will it succeed with the mountain child. The same might be said of books and other teaching materials.

Two additional characteristics of the Highland child and parents as well reverberate and resonate in fundamental ways to influence the character and quality of life in the mountains. Weller suggests that to an extent not known in middle-class society, mountain people's lives radiate from others like the concentric circles of a giant oak (10). The mountaineer's concern is to be liked, accepted and noticed by others in his reference group. What he does is always done in relation to other people and is "the product of participation in the group" (10). Since it is the group upon whom he depends and to whom he is bound for security, there is an ever-present anxiety based on the fear of being rejected. These melodies and rhythms of group acceptance set the pace and style of life in the mountains and they govern the structure of behavior in family, work, and

schooling. Children learn to read people with masterful sophistication long before they even know what a book is; they learn to take their cues from others and do so in place of anything else they may see as possible. Because the group plays such a pervasive role in organizing and directing behavior, its impact on the classroom can be discounted only at great risk. Commonly held notions about decision-making and leadership should be discarded, for the reference group serves as a surrogate for identity and definition -- not as a vehicle for asserting and achieving individual goals. Being in the group is the goal. No one will chance standing out if the price for doing so is rejection by the group.

Teachers who work with mountain children will need to be especially sensitive to feelings, but sensitive, also, to the need to deal substantively and actively with ideas that can be applied immediately. Because there are few if any books in most homes, because language outside the school is used to express feelings rather than ideas, and because school is the only place where mountain culture is likely to find expression in ideas, it is imperative that teachers deal with ideas. But it is equally imperative that these ideas express the mountain culture. Talking to a group of teen-age boys in a remote mountain community in Tennessee, one of the boys asked me if there were many Europeans in Knoxville. I replied that there were many people in Knoxville whose ancestors had come from Europe. He seemed puzzled so I added that there were a few students at the University of Tennessee who had come to America to study. That did not appear to clear up his confusion so I asked what was puzzling him. He said,

"I just can't figger hit out. We's always readin' about 'em so I just reckoned they was around somewheres."

Most instruction in reading for the mountain child represents a form of culture imposed from the outside. Basal readers, trade books and prepackaged kits of one kind or another depict a way of life alien to his own. In direct contrast, however, I have seldom seen a more effective job of teaching done than in a school I visited in Tennessee several years ago. One of the experimental classes in a study I was doing emphasized for me the importance of instruction that reflects the culture of a child. We had created visuals in the form of large flip charts. Undergraduate art majors from the University of Tennessee had gone up into the hills to sketch scenes, activities and people familiar to mountain children. These sketches were reproduced in color on hard backing and bound with plastic spirals. They were dubbed "giant picture books" by the children who told stories about the pictures substituting their experiences for those of the children depicted. These stories were recorded on tape and transcribed on oak tag; they became the basis for reading instruction. There is nothing sacrosanct, however, in the method. The key to literacy is in the culture.

By and large, though, teachers are unprepared to use this key. A study by Roney makes it painfully clear that most mountain teachers are not even prepared to handle the content of reading instruction let alone the demands of two cultures (8). Furthermore, the best teachers in Appalachia are tempted to leave by much higher salaries

elsewhere and do (2,5). A right-to-read program that does not alter these basic facts cannot guarantee anybody's right to read.

What has been suggested can be summarized as follows:

1. Poverty and illiteracy cannot be wished away. Schools are staggering under a formidable array of social and economic illnesses in the mountains. Government is going to have to take up its Constitutional obligations for the general welfare. I would also urge putting some floor under teacher's salaries.

2. The Federal government cannot hope to deal with these problems alone but it most not expect the states and local governments to help until Washington, by its priorities and tax policies, enables them to reform. This calls for political will.

3. Public education in the mountains must grow as an expression of the Highland culture teaching the mountaineer's children not only how to function in the larger culture, but teaching them the dignity and worth of their own culture as well.

4. Plans for the creation of a National Institute of Education should be supported and among its basic goals should be the development of the basic knowledge required to educate teachers to function across cultures.

5. We must take care that the urgency of our problems does not cause us to fit them to available solutions. Nor should we allow ourselves to be lulled into believing that publicizing the right-to-read is the same thing as providing the right to read-for that will only serve to distract and disengage us from things that really count.

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